

LIFE

## Bhutanese sportswomen aim for the top

Female participation in sport takes flight as mountain kingdom modernizes

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Olympic hopeful Sonam Deki, 23, lines up a shot while training in Thimphu. (Photo by Melyn Mckay)

THIMPHU -- "In Bhutan, in the olden days, normally women were not allowed to play archery," says Sonam Deki, 23, eyeing a faraway target stuffed with straw at the Olympic archery stadium in Thimphu. "I really want to prove women can do something equivalent to men," she adds as her arrow burrows into the bullseye.

A member of Bhutan's women's junior national archery team, Sonam Deki is hoping to represent her country at the Olympic games in Tokyo in 2020. Across Bhutan, friendly archery competitions

using traditional bamboo bows and arrows, with targets placed just over 145 meters from the shooters, can be seen in towns and villages almost every day of the week.

Despite its near ubiquity, archery in Bhutan has historically been pursued almost exclusively by men, like many other sports. Yet the Himalayan kingdom was the only country to field an all-female team -- an archer and a rifle shooter -- at the summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, having done the same in London in 2012. Selection for the 2020 Games has not yet begun, but a third consecutive all-female team is a clear possibility.

Bhutan is not the only country to have sent a women-only team to the Olympics; Chad did so in 2012. And serendipity has played a large part in female selection: Both 2016 team members -- Karma Karma, an archer, and Lenchu Kunzang, a rifle shooter -- were able to compete because they were given "wild card" entries by the Olympic authorities, which allow athletes who have not qualified through normal channels to take part.

No Bhutanese athlete -- male or female -- has won an Olympic medal since the country first competed in Los Angeles in 1984. But Bhutan's feminist sporting surge is remarkable. Women are both increasingly visible in traditional sports like archery and more likely to figure in future Olympic teams.



Tenzin Wangmo, 17, reaches the 3,100 meter elevation peak of Dochula Pass in the final climb of the Dragon's Fury, a gruelling 60 km race. (Photo by Melyn Mckay)

This is due, in part, to the significantly greater international competition men face to qualify, but also to the many Bhutanese women who are now challenging traditions that once kept them from participating. The Buddhist kingdom of about 800,000 people was an absolute monarchy until the introduction of a democratic constitution following its first national election in 2008.

The constitution entrenched broad gender equality, but cultural barriers to equal treatment remained. Bhutanese women have traditionally inherited family properties. But while this guaranteed certain rights, it also encouraged women to remain close to the home. Young men, by contrast, were able to seek education and other opportunities more easily, often across the border in India.



Lhaki Dolma, former actress and recently elected member of parliament (Photo by Melyn Mckay)

"Public education really started in Bhutan in the 1960s. Before that everyone had to travel to India" said Lhaki Dolma, 39, a former actress and newly elected member of parliament. "We didn't have good roads ... people always thought women were better off at home, taking care of the children ... so the first educated people from Bhutan were men. I feel that is why women are a little behind, comparatively."

Though Bhutan today has more girls in school than boys, women's prospects are still affected by these domestic expectations -- to say nothing of other limiting factors, such as behavioral proscriptions and the physical challenges posed by traditional dress. As she sits for a portrait, Lhaki Dolma reflects on wearing her *kira* whilst pregnant and seeking election.

The ankle-length national dress for women is folded around the body, pinned at both shoulders and bound at the waist with a long belt; the male equivalent, called a *gho*, cuts conveniently at the knee. These woven silk garments are required dress for Bhutanese women and men working and visiting certain religious and government buildings -- and that includes the campaign trail.

"It is a mountainous terrain, a rough terrain that you have to walk every day," said Lhaki Dolma. "If you look at the east and central Bhutan, you have to walk for days to get from place to place -- I think for female candidates (for parliament) that is the most challenging thing."



Lenchu Kunzang, 25, examines her pellet gun at the Olympic stadium in Thimphu. (Photo by Melyn Mckay)

According to Lhaki Dolma, the limitations for Bhutanese women are to some extent self-enforcing. That is why she and a growing number of female leaders are encouraging women to make use of their rights. "Some girls, I think, still have this thought that we can't do as much as the boys can," she said. "I have two girls so I always tell them, 'you have to compete, because the world is very competitive. You can't just stay back.'"

In the sporting arena, male allies such as Sonam Karma Tshering, secretary general of Bhutan's National Olympic Committee, are trying to encourage more women to participate. "For the Olympics, we always try to aim for gender balanced teams," Sonam said of the committee that will select candidates for Tokyo. "However I think in some sports like shooting, the women athletes actually do better than men."

Female sharp shooters Lenchu Kunzang, 25, and Kunzang Choden, 34, have become household names after competing in the Rio and London Olympics, respectively. Another shooter, Paralympian hopeful Kinley Dem, 24, is also training to compete in Tokyo.

The growing female passion for sport extends beyond the Olympics. Increasingly, Bhutanese women are emerging as competitors in cycling competitions that take place on the country's only national highway. The 2018 edition of the Dragon's Fury, a 60 km race that climbs to 3,150 meters, had five Bhutanese women participants, all under 30.



Young girls in traditional clothing wait to cheer on competitors in the Dragon's Fury. (Photo by Melyn Mckay)

"Compared to last year, we have more women riders. So I'm very happy we are coming up," said Chimi Dema, 22, who first attempted the race in 2016. "It's very important for women to participate because sport is essential for our bodies and we gain more self-confidence. I strongly believe if we are physically fit then we are mentally fit -- and healthy mind and body leads to [a] healthy nation."

Sarita Tamang, 20, who finished just behind Chimi Dema in this year's race, said she decided to take part after seeing Chimi Dema ride in an earlier race. "I got involved because I saw other women participating," she said breathlessly after rolling over the finishing line.

Tshering Zangmo, a member of the Bhutan Olympic committee, said role models such as Chimi Dima were vital in expanding female sporting participation. "Women don't have the culture of

training and to participate you must train. So that's one of the difficulties," she said. "For women, we don't have so many role models, and that makes a difference."

Chimi Dima is hoping to involve more women in cycling in the coming year, while also pushing herself to take on an even greater challenge -- the Tour of the Dragon, a 260 km race that takes participants over four mountain passes in a day.

"This is my third Dragon's Fury," she said. "Now, if I can, I'm planning to do the Tour of the Dragon next year -- it's my dream."